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Educational systems' autonomy. Facts and analysis

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Abstract

The autonomy of the educational system is a key issue on the political agenda of many European countries. During the last twenty years, schools have been the subject of numerous reflections and reforms, particularly in the level of autonomy granted. They were vested with more powers in order to improve democratic participation, more effective management of public funding for education and especially in recent years, increasing the quality of education. In this context we can approach this subject on the one hand as a way of protecting ethnic minorities (including by ensuring education in mother language) and on the other hand as a means of implementing the principle of subsidiary in education through decentralization of education service. The principle according to which schools should be autonomous is widespread in the European countries. The reforms in the '80s, introduced particularly in Spain and France, were enrolled in a logic of participatory democracy and highlighted the need for schools to provide greater outreach to local communities in which they develop their activity. The 90's were marked by a concern for efficiency in the management of funds and public services. After the year 2000, the transfer of new responsibilities to schools was linked to the concern of improving the quality of education. A new pragmatic approach of an experimental type should be remarked once with the pilot projects and gradual implementation of reform measures related to school autonomy. In most European countries, school autonomy measures are defined by a national legislative framework and are imposed on all schools. The "top down" approach of school autonomy is confirmed by the fact that school staff rarely stayed at the origin of this process. The present paper will analyze the educational systems' autonomy in the national and European context using qualitative and quantitative indicators.

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1. Methodology

The central idea which emphasizes the concept of autonomy is indicated by its etymology: *autos* – (through) its self and *nomos* – rule of law. The concept used was for the first time in the Greek cities. A city had autonomy when its citizens made their own laws as opposed to being controlled by a conquering power. Thus, it is a natural human tendency to be autonomous when the decisions and actions are their own.

Is autonomy a global or local concept? At what level is centered autonomy- individual decision, laws, values, motivation? Why is the development, maintenance and improvement of autonomy a goal?

Usually, autonomy is defined as being the guarantee of self-government of a region or a group of persons, thus being recognized a partial independence regarding the way of government influence. This independence can be determined mainly by the degree of independence of the autonomous entity regarding the process of political decision- making. Often, the term “self-government” is used instead of autonomy. It is a concept that many authors consider it as being similar to that of autonomy. Moreover, in the legal-political vocabulary, autonomy denotes self-government.

Proudhon observed that “in any society, even the most authoritarian, one part is necessary reserved to freedom, just as in any society, even the most liberal, one part is left to the authority”.

Authority prevents freedom to fall into anarchy; freedom prevents the authority to fall into tyranny. In the administrative organization of a state, the different administrative arrangements represent the relations between authority and freedom, between the discipline of life and life itself.

The present paper is structured into four parts:

- Part I Theoretical approach
- Part II – General conceptual framework and the basis of decentralization of the public educational service in Romania
- Part III – A global overview on educational system as public service.
- Part IV - Conceptual framework and the basis of decentralization of the public educational service in Romania

2. Theoretical approach

As highlighted by Hannum and Lillich (Hannum & Lillich, 1980), autonomy is in general understood as being the independence of the acts at an internal level. One of the characteristics can be represented by the existence of a local police for supervising the internal security and public order. This is due to the fact that local police is seen as a normal part/ component of the governmental powers.

The issue of public organization's autonomy is day by day more important, both from a practical and theoretical point of view. Distinctively when we take into consideration the administrative organization of entities it can be observed a phenomenon which exists both in OECD countries and in developed ones: the need of institutional autonomy.

In the framework of comparative analysis made by Pollitt and Bouckaert regarding the public management it can be noted both a growing tendency of specialization of functions and a decentralization of authorities, from the center to the periphery, correlated with the decreasing size of the public sector through the decreasing of the important bureaucratic organizations. (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2000)

This trend of specialization, decentralization and fragmentation, started in the Anglo-Saxon world in the 80's (New Zealand, Great Britain). But it later developed in countries like Canada and Netherlands, and it can be easily observed in Belgium.

Some authors have named this phenomenon „the agency” of the public sector and identified it as being part of the New Public Management's doctrine developed in the past years. Schick (Schick, 2002) labeled this trend as „New Public Management's.” Talbot (2004) claimed that „the shape of the autonomous organization of the public activities became subject of the reform programs in many countries in recent years [and that] these initiatives can be grouped in different forms: the reform of pre-existing entities (USA, Sweden, Finland), the creation of new ones, with limited autonomy (UK, Netherlands), achieving high autonomy in extreme situations”. Talbot added that in some cases it can be observed the creation of new tasks (UK, Netherlands) while in other cases reaching the performance is added to the pre-existing tasks (USA). In either cases it is always followed the task to reach the

improvement of quality of public services and the performance of public sector. The so-called ideal type of entity subject to the New Public Management was considered as promising.

Of course, there are various forms of autonomy: from territorial autonomy, to personal autonomy, cultural autonomy or functional autonomy, but also autonomies with administrative and regulatory powers. The existing of such different forms of autonomy should be kept in mind when the term of „autonomy” is used, and the context in which the term is mentioned should be clarified first.

3. Educational system as public service. Global overview

The autonomy of the educational system is a key issue on the political agenda of many European countries. During the last twenty years, schools have been the subject of numerous reflections and reforms, particularly in the level of autonomy granted. They were vested with more powers in order to improve democratic participation, more effective management of public funding for education and especially in recent years, increasing the quality of education.

In this context we can approach this subject on the one hand as a way of protecting ethnic minorities (including by ensuring education in mother language) and on the other hand as a means of implementing the principle of subsidiary in education through decentralization of education service.

The principle according to which schools should be autonomous is widespread in the European countries. The reforms in the '80s, introduced particularly in Spain and France, were enrolled in logic of participatory democracy and highlighted the need for schools to provide greater outreach to local communities in which they develop their activity. The 90s were marked by a concern for efficiency in the management of funds and public services.

After the year 2000, the transfer of new responsibilities to schools was linked to the concern of improving the quality of education. A new pragmatic approach of an experimental type should be remarked once with the pilot projects and gradual implementation of reform measures related to school autonomy. In most European countries, school autonomy measures are defined by a national legislative framework and are imposed on all schools. The "top down" approach of school autonomy is confirmed by the fact that school staff rarely stayed at the origin of this process. In the Nordic countries, where local authorities have a major role in education, each municipality can decide on certain responsibilities transferred to schools. Therefore, transfer patterns may vary from one school to another within the same country. In the Netherlands, the principles that formed the background of decentralization have made the central government to cease to engage in detailed organization of school management.

European Union countries have granted different degrees of autonomy to schools, according to area of responsibility. In most countries there is a decision-making autonomy on operational expenses. This autonomy is less pronounced when buying computer equipment. If we take into account the cost of real estate, schools have a full autonomy in relation to these three parameters in Belgium, Latvia and Sweden, while in Bulgaria, Cyprus and Romania, and this is accomplished only on primary level. In most cases, institutions are free to raise private funds through donations, sponsorships and revenue from space rental, the cases where they have the power of decision-making on borrowing, are rare. Certain autonomy in private fund raising does not automatically assume the existence of autonomy on the use of these funds.

There are countries where schools do not have any autonomy in this area (Germany, Greece, Cyprus, Luxembourg, Iceland and only on a primary level, Ireland and France). More than half of the countries do not grant any type of autonomy to schools regarding the directors of these institutions.

In general, greater autonomy is given to the management of teachers. Schools can often select substitutes for absent teachers and can provide supplements for after-hours or for the unforeseen tasks in the contract, but rarely can decide on the dismissal of a teacher. In most countries, institutions have a relatively greater autonomy in terms of auxiliary staff. At school level, the management of public and private funds is, generally speaking, a common responsibility of the director and the school board. Human resource management is often the responsibility of the school principal, but in almost half of EU Member States, schools are not responsible for selecting teachers.

We cannot see that today a certain pressure is put on schools in order to achieve results. In most EU countries, to the organizations responsible in a traditional way with the evaluation of the stakeholders in the educational system were given greater powers of control in the context of school autonomy. Inspection systems operate on a centralized

or devolved organizational model. A multi-empowerment trend is developing in some countries in which schools must be responsible in front of several actors: ministries of education, local authorities, and civil society.

4. General conceptual framework and the basis of decentralization of the public educational service in Romania

Educational reforms have arisen much controversy and discussion, because some analysts believe that policy should focus on decentralization, democratization and management improvement, while other researchers believe that in order to keep expenses under control a planning and a centralized management of educational services as well as a higher degree of centralization in the educational sector is required.

It is widely accepted that decentralization represents the transfer of authority and power regarding the planning, management and decision making in the public sector, from a higher to a lower level of government or, in general, from national to regional level. Decentralization is thus considered as a political and administrative process that entails certain advantages by stimulating the efficiency and effectiveness in providing education services.

From an economic perspective, we consider that decentralization leads to a better governance and management of public service through increased distribution efficiency due to better convergence between public services and local preferences, and technical efficiency by reducing bureaucracy and a better knowledge of local costs.

One of the objectives of the decentralization process we can include the improving of the administrative capacities at local level, whose monitoring and evaluation is thus more difficult to achieve. The evaluation of the results of decentralization process needs a multidisciplinary approach and using different analytical methods, because quantitative indicators can be interpreted and misused in the absence of a qualitative analysis of the policy setting process.

Modern education system is a complex one, involving links between different types of decentralization, which should be analyzed permanent. Although in reality there are differences between various forms of decentralization, we appreciate that they are not mutually exclusive. All government structures consist in a combination of these forms of decentralized management, the difference being the amount of authority transferred to decentralized units from one country to another.

In Romania, decentralization is intended not to be a target in itself, but rather a means to increase quality, efficiency and equity of public education. Through the decentralization of education, the ministry of resort aims to improve public participation in the cost of education by connecting the school to the community and transform it into a strong institution, empowered to meet local development needs, following the administrative capacity, increase transparency and increase local accountability.

Decentralization measures can have the aimed effect if they are coherent, explained, understood, agreed and implemented by all stakeholders and if they will lead to the democratization of school life, the design and implementation of the budget in optimum conditions, the development of the school's own revenue sources. The ideas and proposals for decentralization may be viable if the communication strategies between initiators and implementers of policy shows the benefits of decentralization for schools towards increasing the social status of teachers and the improvement of the education quality. The analysis of the obtained results in the reform of the Romanian administration reveals as advantages of education decentralization: a better understanding of the local problems and the need of each school unity and the possibility of quick intervention in resolving their current problems.

It is considered that school education decentralization represents the transfer of administrative and financial powers at the level of the resort ministry and other specialized bodies subordinated or under its coordination at the level of education and public administration authorities.

In our vision the development of the Romanian education decentralization was undoubtedly a sinuous one, marked by the lack of political will to reach its finality, the measures taken for decentralization having little impact on the educational system.

The difficulties encountered in the public education service decentralization are, among others: political involvement and abusive interpretation of the legal framework, non-transparent and insufficient financing; insufficient training and management; reluctance and inertia to change; lack of motivation and involvement of decision makers; difficulties in obtaining consensus among participants in the process of decentralization. As a

World Bank study shows, the average salary of a teacher in the OECD countries is 1.31 of GDP/ Capita while in Romania is only 0.95 of GDP/capita. An increase of 0.36 units of GDP/capita is urgent, if we want to attract quality human resources for the teaching career and have performances at least at the OECD average (World Bank, 2007).

When we refer to the implementation of educational policy, the more difficult goal, and at the same time the most important is represented by the transfer of decision concerning in the financial and human resources sector in the school management and the involvement of local and county councils, municipalities, parents committees and other partners from civil society in decision-making in these areas. Determining the strategic educational objectives sets the place where the decisions are taken, defining and limiting the decision-making competence in school education.

Romanian school educational ideal is represented by the free development, full and harmonious of human individuality, in personality formation and in assuming a value system that are necessary for personal fulfillment and development, for entrepreneurship development, for active citizen participatory in society, for social inclusion and employability.

In education, structural change takes time and commitments beyond the horizon of an electoral cycle or the life of a government. If we want a profound change then a memorandum is essential to achieve for a national pact for education and research, a commitment of all responsible forces, from political and civil society, who considers that Romania's future, its competitiveness and prosperity depend, in a knowledge economy, more than ever, on structural change of the education system. From 1990 to present, any reform beginning was suppressed by another reform beginning of the next Minister of Education. The system accumulated unnecessary tensions that had a negatively impact on students and parents, the very idea of reform was compromised (Miclea, 2007).

According to the decentralization law, the County Council approves the organizational and the position of the own specialized apparatus, of the institutions and public services funded by the District Council, but the staff would prefer that the school to decide the employment.

The transparency of decision is based on the citizens' access to public information, as well as their participation in decision making. In order to achieve a transparent process of allocation of funds for schools, in the pilot counties there have been established local and county funding committees whose main tasks are the analysis and allocation of funds destined to finance schools.

To finance national education annually is allocated from the state's budget and from local government budgets at least 6% of gross domestic product from that year. Additionally, facilities and educational institutions can autonomously acquire and own revenues. For scientific research is allocated annually from the state's budget, at least 1% of gross domestic product from that year. Schools' budgets are public; the Director of the school has to ensure transparency on fund management and yearly self-reports of the school.

Although the law provides that the school is an institution of the local community that through its representative bodies and authority exercises the ownership and administrator quality of the school property, however the unit manager is appointed by the general inspector or the minister of education.

In our opinion, in the process of responsibility transfer of the educational system from a central level to a local one, the administrative decision of the school is very important, because upgrading the educational system involves the design, implementation and strengthening some genuine partnerships between schools, local council and City Hall, between these institutions and the parents committee, local or regional businesses, school inspectorate and ministry. The law states that the schools have an alternative organizational and functional autonomy, according to the specific of the alternative.

The added value in education is reflected by the ability to integrate graduates into society, based on skills acquired in school and directly related to the professional skills of teachers, by the degree of commitment in fulfilling its responsibilities for educating students.

Article 3 of the National Education Law states the principles of university autonomy that govern the education and lifelong learning in Romania. Thus higher education institutions have autonomy in determining the amount of taxes and are required to notify all interested parties, including the university's website. The Ministry of National Education is a public authority and has the attributes to monitor, to control the implementation and compliance with regulations in higher education and to apply, where appropriate, sanctions. Moreover, it also controls how universities exercise their university autonomy, assumes its own and general mission and exercises its public accountability.

University autonomy is guaranteed by the Constitution of Romania and academic freedom is guaranteed by law. Higher education institutions are organized and run independently of any ideological, political or religious interference. This entitles the university community to establish its own mission, institutional strategy, its structure, activities, organization and functioning, management of their own material and human resources, in strict compliance with law. Fundamental aspects of university autonomy are expressed in the university Charter, approved by the university senate by law. But this type of autonomy is exercised only if public accountability is established. Higher education institution may establish, on a determined period and on projects, research units distinct in terms of revenue and expenses, which have autonomy and own statutes, approved by the university senate.

Staff involved in research institutes, laboratories or research centers of the university has, within the research projects they coordinate, autonomy and personal responsibility, delegated by the authorizing officer, in public procurement and human resource management necessary for the future projects. These activities are conducted in accordance with legal regulations and are subject to internal financial control.

All universities, public or private, are higher education institutions and research institutions. The simply reading of their mission, approved by the respective university senates and contained in the Charter of each university provides evidence of a total uniformity, as in drafting the mission would be used just the copy-paste function. No university has had the courage to focus primarily on master programs, doctoral or post-doc and thus become an intensive research university (research intensive). No university has agreed to tie its mission to the needed workforce and local community agenda, although many of them have only a strict local relevance.

Creating an efficient system of higher education and universities at an international level requires a paradigm shift: from uniformity and dispersion to differentiation and concentration.

In the best current education systems, differentiation and focus have emerged as a result of natural evolution. In the U.S., for example, from more than 4,000 institutions of higher education, only 3% are considered research-intensive, only 550 (13%) grant doctorates, and of these, only 50 offers more than 50% of doctorates. In Canada, only 109 universities grant doctorates and five of them cover more than 50% of accredited doctoral programs. (Miclea, 2007)

On the other hand, where differentiation and concentration did not occur as a result of natural evolution, substantial efforts are being made to implement them quickly. As such, given the current state from Romanian higher education and current trends, system differentiation and the focus of resources are an urgent necessity. The recent classification of universities and fields of study, the National Education Law, differentiates the providers of education at the university level.

Germany launched „the excellence initiative” in order to identify the few elite universities, to which an additional funding of 2 billion euros is allocated. China decided to invest substantially in only one hundred of its universities so that they become world class. In Russia only 40 universities from over 655 state higher education institutions are funded, especially for research, in order to make them globally competitive. France has similar initiatives of concentration and differentiation of the system, and at European level important steps have been made towards establishing the European Institute of Science and Technology.

5. Conclusions

Drawing on principles of political liberalism, the educational system or in generally the functional autonomy is based, among others, the idea that the community to which it applies is the one who best knows their needs, and therefore, are most concerned to achieve them.

Of course, highly complex tasks of public administration consisting in prescription and performance can be achieved only through government ministries. These tasks are performed by a large number of institutions and public enterprises and local government bodies, institutions and enterprises at a local interest. They are created in order to achieve certain prescriptions. From this point of view, they have more simple and limited tasks and therefore they are more homogeneous and more specialized than those of government ministries.

So for example, university tasks are simpler and more homogeneous than those of the resort ministry; hence the need for full university autonomy. These government bodies have a legal status that makes them differ from ministerial administration. They have a legal personality distinct from that of the ministries and a power which allows those to do legal documents. They also have certain autonomy of action in the specialized domain. It should

be noted however, that some of them cannot be independent from the ministerial administration but, they are subordinated to ministries, which have multiple control rights over the activities of these non-ministry administrations, especially on their actions.

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